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ABSTRACT

Career narratives help people understand their skills, interests, values, and goals by viewing them within the context of their lives. This paper provides an explanation of how counselors can identify the means in which career narratives can help people manage traumas and fears. It explains how counselors can learn new activities for themselves and their clients about ways to manage career-related traumas. A discussion is included on the future of narrative counseling. A list of Web resources is appended. (Contains 30 references.) (JDM)

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After Trauma: Rebuild a Life through Career Narratives

by
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International Career Development Conference 2001

After Trauma: Rebuild a Life through Career Narratives

Sally Gelardin, Ed.D.

The Presentation and Its Importance

As a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in which over 6,000 people were missing and assumed dead, people throughout the world were fearful and traumatized. Narratives, or life stories, can help people cope with trauma and fear.

Traumas can bring up memories of past situations arousing fear or trauma, such as natural disasters, abuse, violence, and illness. The terrorist attack affected many sectors of the economy, including personal careers and family income. For one family or person, the recovery may be quick; for another, the recovery may be a lifelong journey.

Although we can't control the world, we can learn to manage our fear. Our experiences are the "building blocks from which vocational identities and career choices are constructed" (Savickas, 2000). By reflecting upon the strengths that we have gained through our life experiences, we can manage our fears and trauma and reconstruct meaningful lives.

Course of Action and Results

Participants in the presentation will define career narratives and related terms.

Participants will identify the ways that career narratives can help people manage traumas and fears.

Participants will learn activities that they can do themselves and share with their clients to help manage career-related trauma.

Participants will explore the future of narrative counseling.

Participants will receive a career narrative list of resources.

Adults Who Have Experienced Trauma

Adults, who have experienced traumas that have affected their livelihood and current job situation, can re-examine their lifework goals.

Career professionals can help themselves and their clients manage trauma in their home and work lives.

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Career professionals who work with children can help children move beyond fear and trauma to reconstruct their lives.

Putting Narratives to Work

Career narratives and related terms are defined:

Narrative counseling: Counselors help clients define, organize, interpret, and evaluate their experiences, values, interests, and skills.

Biological hermeneutics model of careers. People organize information in their own way. They construct the world so that it is congruent with their own beliefs. The constructivist approach originated with Super's life history model for career pattern counseling. Hermenuein is a Greek word meaning to interpret. This method recognizes the significance of person's experience and helps clients to understand their actions and choices from their own point of view.

Contextualism. People construct their lives with the knowledge that they have at hand; i.e., in the context of their own lives. Contextualism is the relationship between people and their environment (Siegelman & Shaffer, 1995).

Bricolage concept of career development. Bricolage means "constructing something new with whatever is at hand." The French definition is "do it yourself." You can see the word bricolage in a French hardware store. Through biographical bricolage, we can learn to solve problems and make decisions by viewing our attitudes, beliefs, competencies, and coping behaviors within the context of our own life.

The reader can learn about activities that demonstrate the theory.

For example, people who have experienced trauma may be filled with negative thoughts. Focusing on a favorite image can put one in a more positive frame of mind. On September 11, 2001, a college student saw the World Trade buildings go down. Weeks later, she is afraid of leaving her apartment or using the New York City subways. To combat her fear, she recalls the image that her mother shared with her when she was young, of an angel on her shoulder. Do you have a favorite image? Do you surround yourself with this image? How do you feel and what happens to your frame of mind when you contemplate this favorite image?

The future of narrative counseling lies in the past.

Professor Mark Savickas (2000) said that our early experiences are the basis for our life's work. Our family stories are the basis of our mission in life. NCDA established a committee to write a paper on how to prepare counselors for career development in the new millennium. The paper highlighted the use of narratives and storytelling in career counseling. To read a copy of the document, call the NCDA : (918) 663-7060. NCDA also produced a videotape on "Career As Story."

Narrative activities need to be designed to help people with career development. Exercises, poems, and lifework book clubs can help people reflect upon their past so that they can make sense out of their work and home life and plan what they want to do and how they want to lead their lives in the future.

Professor Joan Avis at USF suggests that career counselors invite their clients to involve family members in their counseling sessions. You can read her article and other articles on family influences on career development in the Summer 2001 issue of the Career Planning and Adult Development Journal. For a copy, email NETWORK@psctr.com.

We can incorporate other career development theories into narrative counseling. We can write books, present at workshops and conferences, and bring narratives counseling into our work with clients and students.

Before using career narratives in their practice, career development practitioners need to:

Read more in depth about career narratives (see Bibliography).

Identify one's own interests, values, skills, and strengths by reflecting on past experiences (for examples of narrative activities, see http://www.gelardin.net/lifeworks/pages/narrative/exercises).

Unify one's own experiences to create a life story. Keeping a daily journal and writing down one's dreams directly after they occur can be helpful.

Read the NCDA guidelines (http://www.ncda.org/ncdaps) to understand the parameters of the rolesof career practitioners.

"Narrative" (or "Life As Story") Theory

"Narrative" or "life as story" theory is described by Professor Larry Cochran (1997). Cochran said that the two basic reasons for exploring a person's life history are: (1) Past experiences provide information about a person's interests, values, abilities, motives, and character strengths. (2) The way experiences are selected and organized expresses a unifying life story.

We construct personal meanings from past and present actions as well as from subsequent experiences. In narrative counseling, clients and counselors together define, organize, interpret, and evaluate human actions. "Counselors can (a) be aware of clients' conceptualizations, concepts and constructs; (b) help clients become aware of their constructs by offering support; (c) assist clients in constructing a narrative to discover the context of their lives; (c) with their client, develop joint goals that emerge from the joint activities" (Zunker, 1998) .

Telling one's own story allows one to "interpret, evaluate, appreciate, and relate events" (Cochran, 1997) and to build a house that we carry inside. We become the heroes and heroines

of our own story, instead of being controlled by outside forces (i.e., family members; social, political, and religious institutions, our work, the physical environment, the media).

The thoughts and feelings that result from trauma are normal, though they may be painful and perplexing (Ochberg, 1988) . These thoughts and feelings may not surface for a while. The healing process often includes "re-experiencing, avoidance, sensitivity, and self-blame." By telling one's story, a person who has been traumatized can feel more powerful. The career professional can offer exercises that help people identify their interests, values, abilities, motives, and character strengths. People who have been traumatized can be liberated from fear and can love life.

A Recommended Course of Action

Attend further workshops, classes, and seminars on this topic.

A person who has been traumatized may need more help than you can provide. Refer the person to experienced professionals as needed. View the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) web site on Responding to Tragedy (http://www.nbcc.org/memo.htm).

Summary of Presentation

The following career narratives and related terms are defined: (a) narrative counseling, (b) biographical hermeneutics, (c) constructivism, (d) Hermenuein, (e) contextualism, (f) biographical bricolage.

The reader can learn about activities that demonstrate the theory of career narratives, or "life as story." Career narratives help people understand their skills, interests, values, and goals by viewing them within the context of their lives.

The future of narrative counseling lies in the past. Our family stories are the basis of our mission in life. Narrative activities need to be designed to help people with career development. Family members can be invited to counseling sessions. Other career development theories can be incorporated into narrative counseling. We can write books, present at workshops and conferences, and bring narratives counseling into our work with clients and students.

Before using career narratives in their practice, career development you can read more about career narratives, identify your own interests, values, skills, and strengths by reflecting upon one's past. Then you can organize these experiences to create a life story in which you are the hero or heroine. Read the NCDA guidelines to understand the parameters of your role in helping clients.

Conclusion

The meaning of fear in our home and work lives was posed in a question by Fanita English, who survived the Holocaust. She asks, "What stitches do we have to keep repeating meticulously in order to complete a meaningful pattern for the cloth of our lives, whereby the past can be enveloped and still offer something for the future?" To collectively work through their fears, women throughout the country are weaving together stories of the recent disaster in quilts.

Within English's question lies the answer. The search for answers keeps us going. We can model the behavior that we want to pass on to our children. We may not be in control of what is happening around us, but we can observe what is happening and the reactions of our children, as well as our own reactions. To combat fear and to recover from trauma, we can ask questions, share stories and listen to our children, to others, and to ourselves. Only then will layers of fear unfold, giving way to inner and outer peace.

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Career narrative exercies can be found on the Gelardin Family Lifeworks web site: http://www.gelardin.net/lifeworks/narratives/exercises .

NCDA ACES paper. "How to Prepare Counselors for Career Development in the New Millennium. http://www.ncda.org .

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Web Resources

After a Disaster: Steps You Can Take to Cope with a Stressful Situation:
http://www.wright.edu/sopp/cps/TraumaticStress.html

The Child Survivor of Traumatic Stress:
http://users.umassmed.edu/Kenneth.Fletcher/kidsurv.html

Helping Children After a Disaster: Facts for Families from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:
http://www.aacap.org/

Coping with Emotions after a Disaster:
http://www.psychworks.com/PTSD%20response.htm

Managing Traumatic Stress, American Psychological Association:
http://www.apa.org

After a Disaster: Steps You Can Take to Cope with a Stressful Situation
http: //www.wright.edu/sopp/cps/TraumaticStress.htm

National Center for PTSD has a large literature base
http://www.ncptsd.org/

School Mental Health Project/ Center for Mental Health in Schools
UCLA Dept. of Psychology,
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563,
(310) 825-3634 / Fax: (310) 206-8716,
Email: smhp@ucla.edu
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

In response to the Columbine tragedy, Sesame Street Workshop developed a website, "Tragic Times, Healing Words" website on helping children cope with disaster. The site is still a useful tool for parents and teachers.
http://www.sesameworkshop.org/parents/advice/article/0,4125,49560,00.html

Where Was God? Minnesota Public Radio: First Person. 9/23/01.
http://www.acommonplace.org/.

The U.S. Education Department's web site features suggestions for parents & educators trying to help their children understand the terrorist attacks" (September 14, 2001)
http://www.ed.gov/inits/september11/index.html

The New York Times articles
http://www.newyorktimes.com/ :

- Word for Word/Young Voices: In the Shadow of Tragedy: 'My World Got Shut Down'. The New York Times, September 23, 2001.

- To fill a club, just tell a story. The New York Times, May 2, 1999. Art and Architecture Section, p. 9.

- Taking refuge on the Internet, a quilt of tales and solace. New York Times. September 20, 2001. D3.

- Rituals for grieving extend past tradition into public displays. The New York Times. A Nation Challenged: Critic's Notebook. September 18, 2001.